

Planning for Social Justice in California: Observations from a Planner

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The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) Code of Ethics includes an aspirational responsibility for planners to seek social justice. However, the Code is silent on how this work is to be done. In many communities, planners are enjoined from pursuing equity objectives. In other places, the social component of community planning is being addressed in a meaningful way. This article explores how several California communities are responding to this challenge to the planning profession. These approaches can be models for others seeking to embrace a more socially just model for community planning.

Background

This article examines the AICP Code of Ethics principle to seek social justice, which should guide and be a portion of the ethical framework of professional planners. The article then considers the state legislative construct around social justice issues for planners in California. Finally, examples of local plans which fulfill the expectations for addressing issues of social equity are briefly examined. These plans achieve the AICP Code expectation for planners to seek social justice and may be models for planning practice elsewhere.

To be a Certified Planner, the American Planning Association (APA) requires professionals to both pass an examination and to embrace a Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Because planning impacts the public, matters of trust and ethical conduct have always been addressed through a Code. Originally, the American Institute of Planners (AIP) (one of the predecessor entities of the American Planning Association) had a Code of Ethics. In 1978, a new Code was adopted by the American Planning Association, when the American Society of Planning Officials and the American Institute of Planners (AIP) merged. In 2001, the Government Law Center of

Albany Law School assessed APA's 1978 Code of Ethics and made recommendations for changes. In response, the Code of Ethics was revised by the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) in March 2005. The Code was subsequently amended, but the 2005 version clearly lays out a set of ethical expectations for certified planners and imposes standards for how the work of planning is accomplished.

The Code contains multiple provisions. Section A includes aspirational principles that are ideals. An allegation that a planner failed to achieve one of the principles cannot be the subject of a misconduct charge. Section B continues rules of conduction for which certified planners can be held accountable through the filing of charges of misconduct.

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Included in Section A is:

A.1. Our Overall Responsibility to the Public
(Excerpts):

a) We shall always be conscious of the rights of others.

f) We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.

“We shall seek social justice.” This phrase was added to the Code in 2005. The original language proposed to the Commission by then AICP President Dan Lauber was more specific. He suggested the following language: “We shall propose and seek to identify the social impacts of planning proposals and decisions, including but not limited to, their effect on racial and socioeconomic composition of the community and region.”

(D. Lauber, personal communication to Ethics Committee, May 26, 2004.) Lauber believed that his recommendation provided direction on what planners should do in a manner that would result in accountability. The majority of the AICP Commissioners (the body charged with approving the actual Code changes) chose the softer version of seeking social justice. This allows greater flexibility in understanding what the actual role of the certified planner should be. (D. Lauber personal communication, February 21, 2013)

Those five simple words, “We shall seek social justice”, in the AICP Code of Ethics can trigger deep emotional and intellectual responses. Because no definition is provided by AICP for the concept, individual planners can and do debate its meaning for the organization and its members. However, certified planners are not free to ignore the standard. A common sense approach recognizes that the planning process, especially in its incarnation as development review, asks the same fundamental question about every project: Is this a good idea for my community? Why is it a stretch of the imagination to ask: Is this a good idea for all the people of my community? At its core, the ethical principal imposes a duty on planners to advocate for those whose voices are not being heard. A short list would include children, the poor, transients, refugees, the very ill, or the elderly.

The Code’s exhortation to seek justice should be one that underlies organizing and carrying out a comprehensive plan. It is worthwhile to note that the specific language adopted by the AICP Commission uses an action verb: “seek.” The plain English reading of the verb means

to attempt to achieve. You have to give it your best shot. Synonyms offered for the term “seek” are equally indicative of a call to action: demand, try, or request. The Code does not say, “Give some limited consideration to social justice.” The AICP Code of Ethics also reflects the expectation that planners will urge changes in policy to achieve improved economic and racial integration. The Code anticipates a direct and affirmative response. It sets a somewhat higher bar than the “consider social impact” language of The Code of Ethics for Architects. However, the term social justice remains undefined in the AICP Code of Ethics, as noted above, which leaves planners somewhat in the dark beyond references to choice and opportunity, which are not outcome based concepts.

Further, the governing body of AICP chose to place this behavioral norm among the aspirational principles rather than the Code of Conduct—the latter is enforceable, the former is not. This determination may reflect what some see as the political reality of planning work. Someone else (a client of a consulting firm, a city manager in local government) will determine the purpose and scope of the planning activity, not the planner. The language in

“We shall seek social justice.”

the Code (see below) about the role of others in determining the nature of the planning work has the effect of weakening

the impact of the aspirational standard for social justice.

A.2. Our Responsibility to Our Clients and Employers

b) We shall accept the decisions of our client or employer concerning the objectives and nature of the professional services we perform unless the course of action is illegal or plainly inconsistent with our primary obligation to the public interest.

So, on the one hand, planners are off-the-hook if they fail to achieve any consideration of social justice or equity in their planning work. They cannot be found guilty of failing to adhere to the Code of Conduct and thereby risk their status as Certified Planners. Nonetheless, the aspirational standards set the framework for considering one’s ethical responsibilities to the profession and to the public. Certified planners owe allegiance to the principles in formulating how they will serve the public interest.

The California Planning Framework

Several examples from California highlight how the responsibilities to serve the public interest and seek social justice play out in the real world. Planners in California are expected, when preparing comprehensive plans, to address environmental justice. In contrast with some states, California planners have a rich historical and legal framework for comprehensive planning. Since 1937, cities and counties have been required to adopt general plans (called comprehensive plans elsewhere). State law requires

the following elements (chapters) in a general plan: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise and safety. The following elements are optional: air quality, capital improvements/public facilities, community design, economic/fiscal development, energy, flood management, geothermal, parks and recreation, and water.

In 1992, the Environmental Protection Agency published a report noting that racial minorities and low income populations experienced higher than average pollutant and hazardous waste exposure. After the release of the report, President Bill Clinton signed an Executive Order in 1994 requiring consideration of environmental justice.³ The purpose of the order, according to the text, was to focus Federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions in minority and low-income communities with the goal of achieving environmental justice. The order was also intended to promote nondiscrimination in Federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information on, and an opportunity for public participation in, matters relating to human health or the environment. Accompanying the Order was a memorandum that highlighted the existing federal laws that could further environmental justice, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the National Environmental Policy Act. The Guidelines cite this historical context as the framework for how the work of environmental justice is to be incorporated into the planning framework.

The Guidelines, prepared by the California State Office of Planning and Research (OPR), are the road map used by planners to flesh out the legislative requirements for planning. In 2001, the State Legislature required the General Plan Guidelines to include environmental justice.¹ The term “environmental justice” was defined by the California State Legislature as “the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.”² In response to the State mandate for considering environmental justice, the Guidelines were re-published by the California Office of Planning and Research in 2003. Those updated Guidelines remind planners of the historical context for recognizing issues of environmental justice and links environmental justice to sustainable development.

The California state law, which required the OPR to add environmental justice to the Guidelines, proposed methods for local governments to carry out the work:

- Planning for the equitable distribution of new public facilities and services that enhance community quality of life.
- Providing for the location of industrial facilities and uses that pose a significant hazard to human health and safety in a manner that seeks to avoid over concentrating these uses in proximity to schools or residential dwellings.

- Providing for the location of new schools and residential dwellings in a manner that avoids proximity to industrial facilities and uses that pose a significant hazard to human health and safety.
- Promoting more livable communities for transit oriented development.

When providing guidance to communities in dealing with environmental justice, OPR tackled the notion of equity head-on by stating:

Problems of environmental justice can be broken down into two categories: procedural inequity and geographic inequity. In other words, unfair treatment can manifest itself in terms of process or in terms of results. Procedural inequity occurs when the planning process is not applied uniformly...Geographic inequity describes a situation in which the burdens of undesirable land uses are concentrated in certain neighborhoods while the benefits are received elsewhere.⁴

OPR further explained that community involvement in planning is a critical element of environmental justice. The Guidelines urged communities to work with all affected populations and to develop strategies to overcome linguistic, institutional, cultural, economic, and historic barriers. The agency went on to define “compatibility” as a central element of environmental justice and noted the failure of planning to deliver on its original promise to reduce the harmful effects of incompatible land uses.⁵ Industrial uses potentially harmful to people living nearby had not been eliminated and had, in many communities, proliferated. The solution put forth by OPR included mixed use zoning with a prohibition on industrial uses located next to schools or residential areas.⁶ The solution expressed the view of OPR that sustainable development was more equitable and so it was promoted as a way to avoid continuing the problems of development, which segregated residential uses from other activities. The calling out of limitations on new locations for industrial uses next to schools or residential areas was potentially for greater emphasis.

OPR’s guidance encourages communities to develop data to support environmental justice policies focused on linking demographic data to the location of facilities that enhance community life and also to facilities that pose a hazard to human health and safety. However, all of the guidance about where to locate industrial facilities in relation to communities of color, arrived at the time that manufacturing was departing from the State of California. Rather, for many (but of course not all) communities, the road network constitutes the most significant source of pollutants.

The guidance also mentions specific locational decisions that should be reflected in the long range planning for communities. For example, neighborhood

facilities like parks should be dispersed and citywide facilities like museums should be located in an urban core and accessible by transit. The OPR's guidance also pointed out the limitations of fiscal and legal constraints, which can constrain the application of these planning principles. Of the two, the dramatically declining resource base of local government made the location of new "quality of life" public facilities a rare event.

OPR's guidance acknowledged that industrial facilities are still needed, but they should be buffered from residential areas. Over-concentration of industrial areas should be addressed through rezoning and certain types of facilities should be capped. Because of the declining manufacturing sector, these issues with industrial facilities have played out primarily on a regional basis. For example, in California, inland communities deeply resent the health effects of the landfills and sewage sludge drying facilities, which serve large, built out cities.

The most enthusiastic response of communities to the 2003 Guidelines came in the form of embracing recommendations for transit-oriented development (TOD). Many cities planned for the conversion of older commercial corridors to vibrant mixed-use areas. The prevailing wisdom in California is that TOD reduces vehicle miles traveled and thereby improves air quality and also provides more vibrant places for people to live.⁷ A general observation is that cities served by strong mass transit (rail, bus-rapid transit) have seen mixed-use development occur. Meanwhile, cities relying on buses have yet to see their plans for large-scale mixed-use development implemented by the marketplace. But the benefits of TOD to low income people of color seem less clear. Articles published in the major urban daily newspapers noted over time how the exciting new mixed-used housing projects in big city downtowns forced the former low-income residents out of their neighborhoods. This article does not deal with the problems of urban gentrification, though California has serious challenges in this area.

California Examples

Even with the OPR guidance in place, few communities explicitly address issues of justice (environmental and otherwise) in their General Plans. Most communities are addressing issues of sustainability and thereby responding in a very indirect way to the State mandate.⁸ However, there are cities in California where the residents believe that one of the purposes of government is to blaze a trail on issues of equity and those cities have done much to show us what the work of planning for justice looks like.

The City of Pasadena

The City of Pasadena, with a population of approximately 140,000, is located in Los Angeles County in Southern California. Pasadena is home to many cultural and scientific institutions and has a reputation for a reasonably progressive stance on social issues.

In recent years, the city has tried to incorporate equity

through revisions to its General Plan and a cultural heritage effort. In a hand-out presented in a community workshop, the following information was provided on a proposed policy addressing economic and social equity:

*Economic and Social Equity:*⁹

- A. Incorporate social equity in economic development policies:
 1. Encourage businesses that provide a mix of jobs that approximate the skills of the city's population.
 2. Encourage developers and institutions to provide job training for emerging sectors of the economy.
 3. Provide or preserve sites for job training.
- B. Improve access and connectivity between neighborhoods that are divided by the freeway.
- C. Ensure access to healthy food sources; allow community gardens.¹⁰
- D. Include housing as a social equity issue.¹¹

When this policy calling for economic and social equity was tested in on-line and mailed surveys, 60% of the respondents agreed with the principle that Pasadena should promote sustainability defined as a balance between social equity, a strong economy, and a healthy environment. The support for diverse, affordable housing options dropped declined by 23% to now only 37%.¹² (Pasadena General Plan Update Survey Report, 2011). The support for affordable housing is notable in a state where (like other places) NIMBYISM is often the rule of the day. Pasadena's Housing Element (California nomenclature for the required housing component of the General Plan), reflects strong local values and is consistent with the very detailed guidance of the Housing and Community Development Department of the State of California. The Pasadena Housing Element argues persuasively in favor of housing choice and providing a continuum of care for those with the least choice.¹³ Implementation of the Housing Element is largely dependent on declining federal and state resources, and revenue from redevelopment projects, which have been eliminated by the State. All cities, not just Pasadena, are struggling to address issues of housing affordability, especially since the courts recently struck down one of the more well-known inclusionary ordinances.

Pasadena adopted a plan in 2005 that incorporated equity into planning for arts and culture. Called the "Cultural Nexus," it is an action plan for the cultural sector. Two years later, the City's Arts and Culture Commission adopted a statement entitled "Cultural Access Policy and Equity." The policy is broad in its scope.¹⁴ The policy expects:

1. Equal accessibility to cultural institutions, art venues, and cultural events regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, age, sexual orientation and disability.
2. Consideration of universal design standards by artists and arts and cultural organizations for exhibitions, projects, and events.

Other policies address access for various populations in Pasadena. For example, the General Plan highlights the growing use of the Internet for cultural organizations to market themselves and notes the impact this can have on seniors and others with limited access to technology. Additional recommendations address the need to recognize and include culturally diverse populations in the selection of art and artists. Cultural heritage is cited as a resource worthy of preservation and is to be encouraged through invigorating the artistic capacity of Pasadena's diverse population. The goals and policies of Pasadena are reflective of the deepest commitment to equity and inclusionary practices.

PolicyLink and the City of Richmond

One of the California organizations focused on issues of justice and equity is PolicyLink. PolicyLink is a national research and action institute, which seeks to advance economic and social equity.¹⁵ For several years PolicyLink assisted the City of Richmond, California in its General Plan preparation. PolicyLink met with community groups, identified issues and options, and conducted research. Informed by PolicyLink's work, the City included a Community Health and Wellness Element in the plan, which was adopted in April, 2011.

With a population of 103,000 in the Northern California bay area, Richmond is a city of heavy industry. World War II brought Standard Oil to Richmond and the Chevron refineries continue to operate today. The General Plan document notes the impact of industry on health challenges faced by the community, which include toxics.

Many Richmond residents are affected by environmental pollutants. About 1,050 acres in 41 parcels are recognized by the California Department of Toxic Substances (DTSC) in Richmond as contaminated sites.¹⁶

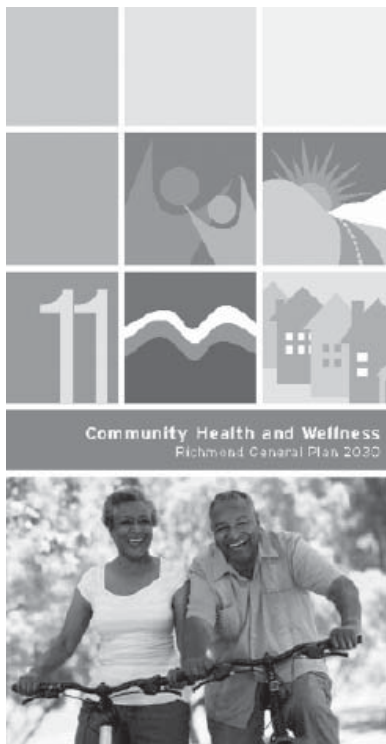
Other problems noted in Richmond's Health and Wellness Element:¹⁷

- Richmond lacks adequate healthy food outlets and full service grocery stores.
- Transit service to medical facilities is very limited on nights and weekends.
- Much of the existing housing stock needs maintenance and safety upgrades.
- Many residents are not adequately trained to compete for high-skill jobs in the region.
- There is a high incidence of violent crimes.
- Many residents are impacted by air, water, soil, and noise pollution.

Treating all of these problems as health issues rather than separately in other chapters, like transportation, housing, economic development or safety, is a very different way of conceptualizing how health is understood. This approach is more holistic and not just the absence of disease. The General Plan recommends a multitude of solutions, some of which are predictable and familiar while others are more innovative.¹⁸ Some examples from the General Plan include:

To address the need for healthy food:

- Only allow vending machines on City property that sell nutritional food.



Community Health and Wellness Section from the Richmond General Plan 2030. Image courtesy of <http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/DocumentCenter/Home/View/8816>.

- Establish tool banks, shared processing facilities, funding streams, and technical service providers to create a support system for urban agriculture.

To improve public safety:

- Incentivize the transition of liquor stores to food markets. Consider restricting stand along liquor stores.
- Develop programs that provide shelter and support services to released prisoners and parolees who are transitioning back into the community.

To improve environmental quality:

- Establish and identify funding for a citywide air quality monitoring and reporting program. Assess the cumulative impact of air pollution and toxins on human and environmental health, and monitor exposure of sensitive uses.
- Establish baseline exposures and, to the extent feasible, document health effects associated with monitored baseline exposures. Develop provisions to hold businesses and operations financially accountable for their impacts on the environment or community due to air pollution exceeding legal thresholds.
- Develop a plan to re-route diesel trucks away from neighborhood streets and sensitive uses such as homes, schools, parks and playgrounds to minimize impacts. Ensure that the most efficient and direct routes do not negatively impact low income residents or communities of color disproportionately.
- Build capacity among City staff, boards, and commissions and elected officials with regard to health and its relationship with the built environment. Promote the use of health criteria in reviewing and approving new projects.

As these examples show, the City of Richmond prepared and adopted a plan compliant with the social justice aspirational guidelines of the AICP Code of Ethics. The Code calls for planners to address issues of discrimination. Richmond's efforts to improve community health, safety and environmental quality are in line with these guidelines through expanding choice and opportunity to broad range of members of the community.

The California Planning Roundtable and the City of Watsonville

Another source of information about how the profession is responding to the call for social justice in comprehensive planning comes from the California Planning Roundtable (CPR). The CPR is an organization of experienced planning professionals who are members of the APA. According to the website of the Roundtable,

their mission is to exercise creativity and leadership in promoting understanding of California's critical public policy issues, and recommending action.¹⁹

One of the projects of the CPR is dubbed "Reinventing the General Plan."²⁰ The Roundtable is seeking to revitalize the General Plan as an essential tool to help California communities tackle the tough issues of the twenty-first century. This is an ambitious task, and the Roundtable has identified some best practices in communities. Their website is meant to serve as an incubator that highlights successful and innovative General Plan efforts across California that are transferrable to other communities. The plans and tools included on this website go beyond the basic requirements of General Plans to attain new visions, strategies, and ways of communicating.

At the outset of their work, the Roundtable identified the principles for guiding the General Plan reinvention initiative. Principle No. 5 calls for promoting social equity and economic prosperity. The narrative accompanying the principle says that, "The Reinvented General Plan ensures that all groups enjoy the benefits of a healthy and prosperous community, with access to housing, transportation, jobs and commerce. It enables a variety of businesses to flourish."²¹

The Roundtable Website includes information about several general plans including the City of Watsonville's plan. Their plan is cited as an example of a social equity focus.²² Featuring the work of Watsonville on its website helped to make the City's planning effort more widely recognized. The central California coastal City of Watsonville, with a population of 51,199, has a strong agricultural base and is a diverse community that includes Hispanics, Croats, Portuguese, Filipino, Caucasian, and Japanese. The Watsonville Plan, adopted in 2012, calls out a number of actions which reflect the needs of the community, but which are often left off the policy table. For example:

- Increase the supply of rental housing appropriate for families with children.²³ Rental housing for families with children is often ignored. Such housing is unlikely to pay enough in property taxes to support the impact on local government services and will generate significant financial impacts on school districts with equally limited means. Since the passage of Proposition 13 in the 1970's, local governments have generally chased sales tax and avoided the types of residential development that would be a further drain on limited local resources.
- Encourage social and economic diversity within Watsonville, and environments that promote a shared sense of community.²⁴
- Increase residential areas having diverse housing types and broad range (sic) of household incomes. Diversity itself is embraced a policy theme. In other communities, gated subdivisions are still being approved that limit diversity and certainly do not

promote a shared sense of community.

The plan further notes the need to be aware of the Latino culture and its generally larger and more familial household structure, and how that awareness should play a major role in developing future affordable housing.²⁵ It should be noted that the Watsonville Vista2030 Plan has an entire chapter devoted to diversity.²⁶ Diversity is not listed as either a required or an optional element of the General Plan in California law. Nonetheless, communities like Watsonville are expanding the scope of the General Plan to write about the issues of concern to where they work.

Conclusions

Given the guidance from the State of California's Office of Planning and Research on issues of equity, one might ask how well the State of California is doing as a practitioner of equity planning. The author did a word search for "equity" in the California Transportation Plan2025. The plan was selected because of its wide ranging impact and because of the well documented issues associated with social justice and planning for mobility. The word search revealed that the term appears twice: first, in a section recommending City Car Share to increase system equity, and then secondly in a reference to equity issues associated with a user-based fee structure for increasing the funding stream for transportation improvements.²⁷ There did not appear to be anything else. Maybe it's easier to "do what I say, not what I do" when it comes to planning for equity at the state level.

Several planning efforts in California can be used as models for comprehensive planning for social justice, an aspirational ethical principle in the AICP Code of Ethics. Language in the AICP Code of Ethics addresses the need to seek social justice by expanding choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. This expectation is laid out in the aspirational component of the Code. From the information presented here, it is clear that plans are being written in California that address this Code provision in a realistic and meaningful way. These early adopter communities have laid the foundation for a change in the perception of planners about what it is possible to accomplish. Perhaps someday the Code language will move from the aspirational setting, to the Rules of Conduct and become enforceable.

Endnotes:

¹ AB 1553, Statutes of 2001.

² California Statutes 65040.12(e).

³ Executive Order 12898 was signed on February 11, 1994. It is titled "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations." Among other things, E.O. 12898 directed federal agencies to incorporate environmental justices into their missions.

⁴ General Plan Guidelines, State of California, Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2003. p. 23

⁵ Ibid. p. 24.

⁶ Schools and residential areas have to be called out separately because many schools in California are located along commercial corridors, not interior to residential areas.

⁷ Despite the apparent lack of research confirming a high correlation between bus service and reduced VMTs on a project by project basis, this remains an article of faith among the California Planning Community.

⁸ Annual Planning Survey Results, 2012 published by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research. See generally pp. 16-24 and Appendix G. The survey provides the latest information on local planning activities and special issues of statewide concern at is available on-line www.opr.ca.gov.

⁹ Pasadena General Plan Update, Land Use and Mobility Elements, Community Workshop on the General Plan, Objectives and Policies. March 10, 2012, p. 4. Retrieved February 28, 2013 from <http://www.ci.pasadena.ca.us/Department.aspx?theme=Default&pageid=8589936136>.

¹⁰ "Access to healthy foods" refers to allowing land uses that produce, sell or make available natural or locally-grown foods to the residents of a neighborhood (e.g. food markets, neighborhood-scale commercial growing areas or nurseries that grow and/or sell vegetables and fruits).

¹¹ Information can be found by going to the City of Pasadena's web site at www.ci.pasadena.ca.us and entering the search phrase: economic and social equity.

¹² Pasadena General Plan Update Survey Report, September 2011, Research Partnership, p. 9.

¹³ The term "continuum of care" refers to supportive and transitional housing which generally includes services as well as a place to stay. The continuum ranges from emergency shelters in the event of bad weather to apartments with subsidized rent. The goal of the continuum is to meet current needs with the hope of moving people along the continuum towards greater housing independence.

¹⁴ Cultural Access Policy and Equity Standards. The document can be located on the City of Pasadena's website by searching using the key words "cultural access" at www.ci.pasadena.ca.us.

¹⁵ www.policylink.org.

¹⁶ Richmond (CA) General Plan 2030, p.11-11.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 11-11 through 11-15.

¹⁸ Ibid, scattered from pgs 11-19 through 11-65.

¹⁹ www.cproundtable.org/

²⁰ reinventingthegeneralplan.org. This site can be accessed from www.cproundtable.org.

²¹ <http://reinventingthegeneralplan.org/principles/>. Viewed 1/4/13.

²² Retrieved from www.reinventingthegeneralplan.org on February 28, 2013. “The Watsonville Plan is one of the few General Plans in California that makes social equity a central focus.”

²³ Watsonville, VISTA2030, 2012. p. 1-4.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 1-7.

²⁵ Ibid, p.1-22.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 10-1 through 10-8.

²⁷ California Transportation Plan 2025, California Department of Transportation, 2006. pp. 38, 49.